

## **Conference Review:** First International Conference on Irish Music and Musicians

While the First International Conference on Irish Music and Musicians was indeed a wide ranging conference with great opportunity for discourse amongst experts of differing musical genres, Irish traditional music occupied a somewhat uncomfortable position. Though there were a number of scheduled sessions on Irish traditional music, not all dealt specifically with the genre. In addition, the wonderful concert programme was perhaps undermined by the complete absence of a performance of Irish traditional music.

The conference highlighted the gap between academic curiosity in folk music and the developing community of academics expressing their experience of Irish traditional music from an insider perspective. On the first morning Peter Tolmie and Steve Benford began by exploring ‘the session’, identified as Irish, though their paper seemed somewhat removed from the typical Irish experience. Their typical experience in England was exemplified by a folk music session in Durham, experienced by a number of those in attendance at the conference, in which amateur musicians played a variety of folk music from around Europe, complete with music on tables and a disdain for newcomers.

The central focus of Alish Nypaver’s paper, that the traditional music of Ireland has played a significant role in culturally defining the Irish people as a nation and continues to serve as a distinguishing feature of this culture today, was the crux of many of the papers and discussions throughout the conference. This was particularly prominent when discussing composers such as Hamilton Harty, Charles Villiers Stanford and E.J. Moeran and their use of folk music idioms and even folk melodies in their music. However, the expansion of scholarship on these figures adds greatly to a debate that, heretofore, has been dominated by a concentration on the role and music of Seán Ó Riada.

In fact, Ó Riada appeared as somewhat of an enigma at this conference. In his keynote address, Harry White made the observation that there was no paper at this conference that focused on Seán Ó Riada, one of the most influential and symbolic, if also

perhaps confusing figures in the history of music in Ireland. Professor White's address brought together a number of interesting themes that successfully posed questions to all of the audience, regardless of their specialist interest.

Ó Riada was not entirely absent from the conference, being a key figure in the papers by both myself and Micheál Ó Suilleabháin. Ó Riada's absence in titles and abstracts highlights the greater diversity of scholarship that has emerged in relation to Irish traditional music in which understanding the tradition does not begin and end with Ó Riada. The consistent reference to him placed him on the podium of musical subjects at this conference, arguably dominated by Stanford and Fleischmann.

In examining the papers that did focus on Irish traditional music, of which there were four, it was noteworthy that all four presenters are performers of Irish traditional music. My paper focused on Pat Ahern, a contemporary of Ó Riada who has arguably achieved more than Ó Riada in terms of musical output and the promotion of community culture. Ó Suilleabháin returned to the figure of Tommie Potts and the creativity of the individual. In contrast to Ó Riada, Potts' musical experimentation lies within the eight-bar building blocks used by Ó Riada in arranging music for Ceoltóirí Chualann, and creates a more interesting musical sound than achieved by Ó Riada. Sandra Joyce gave an informed critique of Fleischmann's *Sources of Irish Traditional Music*, noting how, outside of academic institutions, this work has not made a significant impact on mainstream Irish traditional music. Niall Keegan gave an evocative perspective of Irish music in the diaspora, exploring issues of style, identity and authenticity through discussions with musicians in London.

Other papers that came under the banner of Irish traditional music included Andrew Carlisle's excellent exploration of the pipe band tradition in Ireland and its evolution. Adrian Scahill's paper on Damien Dempsey was pre-empted by a questioning of genre and, though positioned within a session on Irish traditional music, was the only foray at the conference into the world of popular music in Ireland.

While the scholarship on music in Ireland has, without doubt, increased immeasurably in recent years, there is still a significant divide between scholars of Irish traditional

music and scholars of other musics in Ireland. By enlarge, the conference succeeded in attracting a wide range of papers on various topics though, to some extent, there was a concentration on figures such as Arnold Bax, E.J. Moeran, Charles Villiers Stanford and Aloys Fleischmann, with little consideration of popular music and jazz. However, such a conference allows scholars from different specialist areas to develop awareness of related research and, in doing so, gain a greater appreciation of the role and diversity of music.